Views of the Millennium

Definition

The Millennium refers to the period of 1,000 year reign of Christ mentioned in Revelation 20:3. The exact timing and nature of what is meant by the Millennium is debated between three viewpoints: Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Premillennialism.

Summary

The Millennium refers to the period of 1,000 year reign of Christ mentioned in Revelation 20:1-4. This passage is notoriously difficult to interpret has been the source of debate among three eschatological schools of thought: Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Premillennialism. The different eschatologies associated with the Millennium relate to the timing of the return of Christ regarding the 1,000 years and what is the precise nature of the Millennium. Amillennialists do not expect a future literal 1,000, but rather view it as Christ's reign with his saints during the time between his two comings. Postmillennialists believe Christ returns *after* the millennium as a golden age when the majority of the world has converted to Christianity. Premillennialists believe Christ returns *before* the millennium preceded by a period of intense tribulation. This article examines some of the details and characteristics of these three views of the Millennium.

Introduction

Eschatology is the field of Christian theology which concerns the study of last things. It is the study of Christ's future return, the resurrection, the rapture, the final judgment, the eternal blessedness of the redeemed with Christ, and the eternal punishment of the damned apart from his presence. Upon these rudimentary points, there is considerable agreement, yet with regard to the particulars, there has been a wide diversity of thought among Christians from the very earliest centuries of the Church. The various eschatologies promoted by theologians throughout history can be organized into three general systems: *amillennialism, postmillennialism,* and *premillennialism*. Each term is distinguished by a prefix attached to the word "*millennium*," which is a compound of two Latin terms, *mille* (thousand), and *annus* (year). The reason for this

nomenclature is because, over time, each view began to be known by its interpretation of Revelation 20:1-10, particularly the timing of the return of Christ with reference to the period of 1,000 years mentioned therein. Therefore, *a*millennialists expect *no* millennium (The prefix –a means, "no"), *post*millennialists believe Christ returns *after* the millennium (the prefix –post, means "after"), and *pre*millennialists believe Christ returns *before* the millennium (the prefix –pre, means "before").

Amillenialism

Although amillennialists *expect* no millennial kingdom, this does not mean amillennialists deny a millennium entirely, as the terminology may seem to imply. Anthony Hoekema provides a concise amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20:

Amillennialists interpret the millennium … as describing the present reign of the souls of deceased believers with Christ in heaven. They understand the binding of Satan … as being in effect during the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ, though ending shortly before Christ's return. They teach that Christ will return after this heavenly reign.

Amillennialists believe we are *presently* living in the millennial kingdom, which is characterized by the simultaneous experiences of gospel victory and suffering for the gospel. This obviously indicates amillennialists interpret "one thousand" figuratively. The gospel is victorious because Satan is bound, rendering him incapable of preventing the spread of the gospel; yet he is not utterly powerless from persecuting the Church. Just before the end, Satan will again be permitted to deceive the nations and persecution will increase dramatically. Christians are awaiting the visible, bodily return of Christ, which brings an end to all their suffering. The second coming occurs concurrently with the general resurrection and a public rapture of the Church, who immediately returns to earth with Christ. Christ then judges the world, and finally ushers in the eternal state.

Important to the amillennialist understanding is the tension of "already/not yet." Christians presently live in the inaugurated kingdom, as Christ reigns from heaven; yet, they await the kingdom's full realization, when Christ will reign on Earth eternally. The inaugurated kingdom endures tribulation and suffering, but also victory as the Gospel spreads; in the consummate kingdom, the new heavens and new earth, there will be eternal rest. Another key point of this view, is the understanding of Old Testament prophecy, especially as interpreted by the New Testament. Kim Riddlebarger writes, "Amillennialists hold that the promises made

to Israel, David, and Abraham in the Old Testament are fulfilled by Jesus Christ and his church during this present age." Since these promises have been fulfilled, no future fulfillment is required. Amillennialists point to passages which teach that the consummation of history occurs at the second coming, with only the eternal state following. Amillennialists base their interpretation of Revelation 20 as recapitulating or re-present the events described in Revelation 19, rather than following it in chronological succession.

Postmillennialism

Postmillennialism holds to the view Christ will return after the millennium. As with amillennialism the terminology falls short. In a strictly chronological sense, the amillennialists and the postmillennialists agree that Christ returns after the millennium. In fact, amillennialists were known as postmillennialists until the twentieth century. Postmillennialists generally agree with the amillennial interpretation of Revelation 20. The two agree the millennium is figurative, not a literal one thousand year period, and that it "is a time in which the gospel is preached throughout the world" as Satan is currently bound. They also agree on the general course of events in the end times: When Jesus comes, then, the general physical resurrection of the righteous and the wicked occurs, followed by the final judgment, and culminating with the new heavens and new earth.
What distinguishes postmillennialism from amillennialism is not the timing of the second coming in relation to the millennium but the nature of the millennium. Whereas amillennialism expects the Church to experience both victory and suffering simultaneously until the second coming, postmillennialism maintains a gradual end to much of the Church's suffering before Christ returns. They expect a golden age of righteousness on earth, the millennium, in which the church experiences increasing prosperity and great influence on the culture. This golden age is what the postmillennialist understands as the millennium. Loraine Boettner defines postmillennialism:

Postmillennialism is that view of the last things which holds that the kingdom of God is now being extended in the world through the preaching of the gospel and the saving work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals, that the world eventually is to be Christianized and that the return of Christ is to occur at the close of a long period of righteousness and peace commonly called the millennium.

Gentry explains, "Postmillennialism expects that eventually the vast majority of men living will be saved." This will lead to "a time in history prior to Christ's return in which faith, righteousness, peace, and prosperity will prevail in the

affairs of men and of nations." This increased percentage of the population who become believers who seek to live according to God's will, which naturally leads to greater and greater degrees of peace and justice within their respective communities. It is important to note that this prosperity is a result of a large percentage of the population of the world living according to God's word.

Postmillennialists usually point to The Great Commission, arguing that it "will be entirely successful." They also point to the messianic Psalms, especially Psalm 2, particularly verses 7-9, "… I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." In addition, they draw attention to the parables of Matthew 13, which seem to indicate the prodigious growth of the church.

Premillennialism

There are two premillennial systems: *historic premillennialism* and *dispensational premillennialism*. Historic premillennialism is labeled such because it more or less resembles the premillennialism held during ancient times known as *chiliasm*. Dispensational premillennialism derives its name from the theology developed by John Nelson Darby in the nineteenth century that divides biblical history into a series of ages or dispensations. Both forms of premillennialism follow a chronological and more literal reading of Revelation 20:1-6 as subsequent to the return of Christ and final battle in Revelation 19:11-21.

George Ladd defines Premillennialism as, "the doctrine stating that after the Second Coming of Christ, [Christ] will reign for a thousand years over the earth before the final consummation of God's redemptive purpose in the new heavens and the new earth of the Age to Come." According to historic Premillennialists, the present age will continue until a brief period of tribulation, after which "Christ will return to earth to establish a millennial kingdom." At the second coming there will be a resurrection of believers and a public rapture. These resurrected believers reign with Christ, who will, "be physically present on the earth in his resurrected body, and will reign as King over the entire earth." During this period, Satan is "bound and cast into the bottomless pit so that he will have no influence on the earth during the millennium." After the millennium, Satan is released for a brief time, during which he leads astray a portion of the world's population in rebellion to Christ. Christ destroys this rebellion, judges the world, then ushers in the eternal state. This interpretation assumes, in contrast to the amillennialist and postmillennialist, that the events described in Revelation 19 and 20 are chronologically successive.

Although Revelation 20 is the only passage to specify a period of 1,000 years, and thus the various positions (a-, pre-, and post-) as “millennial,” this is not the critical question that separates premillennialism from the other two. The critical question is whether this age will issue immediately into the final / eternal state (“the golden age”), or whether a further, intermediary stage of the eschatological kingdom (a “silver” age) lies between. Premillennialists argue that in addition to Revelation 20 passages such as Isaiah 11 and 65-66, Zechariah 14, and 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 also indicate such an intermediary stage, while amillennialists and postmillennialists will refer these passages either to the church age or the final state.

Conclusion

The question of the millennium is an in-house family debate among Christians and requires diligent study coupled with a willingness to engage robustly in biblical text and its interpretation. The differences between these views are the result of hermeneutical, exegetical, and theological perspectives of Revelation 20 and are not a matter of heresy vs. orthodoxy. The hermeneutical questions one may resolve include how to interpret the language and imagery of Revelation, whether to take numbers as literal or figurative, and how to approach the relationship between the Old Testament in the New Testament. Exegetically, there are differences in how one views the relationship between Revelation 19 and 20 if they are chronologically successive or recapitulative. Theologically, how one views the relationship between Israel and the Church, the nature of prophecy, and the order of eschatological events will determine their hermeneutical and exegetical decisions. The various views, if not anything else, provide ample evidence of the difficulty and complexity of interpreting Revelation 20 and related passages, and this warrants a healthy dose of humility when approaching it.

When studying Revelation and eschatology it is all too easy to lose sight of the call of Christ in Revelation, which is to live victoriously as overcomers of sin, the world, and the devil and to remain faithful to him at all costs because he will make all things right in the end. Whatever view one thinks best reflects the teaching of Scripture, it must always be kept in mind that Scripture always presents the doctrine of last things as a motivation for faithful living. In the end, perhaps John Frame draws our attention to the most important eschatological point: “So far as I can see, every Bible passage about the return of Christ is written for a practical purpose –not to help us develop a theory of history, but to motivate our obedience.”

Footnotes

[1]Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 173. See also: Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case For Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 19.

[2]Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 173. Hoekema mentions that due to this potential confusion, some amillennialists prefer the term realized millennialism, as it more accurately describes the amillennialist position. Hoekema, however, dislikes the longer term as "a rather clumsy one," and prefers not to use it. (173–174) See also: Riddlebarger 11; Horton, 935.

[3]Anthony A Hoekema, "Amillennialism," *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*. Edited by Robert G. Clouse. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 182. "General resurrection," meaning all of the dead, whether believers and unbelievers. This is set against premillennial schemes in which the resurrection of the believers and unbelievers are two separate and distinct events.

[4]Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 954. "Publically raptured," meaning it will not be a secret event, invisible to the rest of the world. This is opposed to dispensational views which hold to a "secret rapture." However, it is important to note that amillennialists affirm the rapture: indeed, as John Frame writes, "All Christians believe in the rapture. What is unique to the dispensational view is that in that view the rapture is invisible and secret." (John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2013], 1089.)

[5]Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 935.

[6]Riddlebarger, *A Case For Amillennialism*, 31.

[7]Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 226-7. This is a critical point for amillennialism, since, as Hoekema admits, "If… one thinks of Revelation 20 as setting forth what follows chronologically after what has been described in chapter 19, one would indeed conclude that the millennium of Revelation 20:1-6 will come after the return of Christ." (226) G. K. Beale gives a lengthy defense of this view in his commentary on Revelation. (974-983)

[8]Postmillennialists include Charles Hodge, *Romans* (reprint; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 374; John Murray, *The Epistles to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 2:96–98. Amillennialists include Geerhardus Vos,

Pauline Eschatology, 87–91; Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understand the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 180–94.

[9]Riddlebarger, *A Case For Amillennialism*, 31.

[10]Loraine Boettner, "A postmillennial Response [To Historic Premillennialism] in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Robert G. Clouse, ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 47. Additionally, there have been several forms of postmillennialism, ranging from that held by the Puritans and Jonathan Edwards, and that of the nineteenth and twentieth century liberals and purveyors of the social gospel. The view explained here is that held by Theonomic Christian Reconstructionists, who have enjoyed increasing popularity in recent years.

[11]Gentry, "Postmillennialism," 52-53.

[12]Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1088.

[13]Boettner, "Postmillennialism," 122-123. However, this has not always been so. John Frame writes, "Most recent postmils agree with the amils that the millennium is now, the period from Jesus' ascension to his return. Some postmils, however, especially in the older literature, have said that the millennium is a portion of that period, toward the end of it, before the return of Christ" (*Systematic Theology*, 1088).

[14]Ibid, 117.

[15]Kenneth L. Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (3rd ed., Draper, VI: Apologetics Group Media, Gentry Family Trust, 2009), 119.

[16]Ibid., 119. See also Boettner, "Postmillennialism," 120. "This age gradually merges into the millennial age as an increasing proportion of the world's inhabitants are converted to Christianity."

[17]Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1090.

[18]George Eldon Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Robert G. Clouse, ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 17.

[19]Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 1112. Therefore, Historic Premillennialism is also "posttribulational" meaning that Christ returns after the

Great Tribulation.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1094.

Further Reading

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